

VZCZCXRO5506  
OO RUEHDE RUEHDIR  
DE RUEHRH #2049/01 2761451  
ZNR UUUUU ZZH  
O 031451Z OCT 07  
FM AMEMBASSY RIYADH  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 6681  
INFO RUEHZM/GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL COLLECTIVE IMMEDIATE  
RUEHJI/AMCONSUL JEDDAH IMMEDIATE 9097  
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC IMMEDIATE

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 RIYADH 002049

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E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [KISL](#) [KPAO](#) [SA](#)

SUBJECT: SAUDI,S GRAND MUFTI DISCOURAGES SAUDI YOUTH FROM  
TRAVELING TO TROUBLED REGIONS FOR "JIHAD"

REF: 2005 RIYADH 3443

11. (U) SUMMARY: Saudi press gave extensive coverage to an October 1 sermon given by Sheikh Abdul Aziz Bin Muhammed al-Asheikh, Grand Mufti of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia warning young "zealous" Saudis against traveling abroad under the pretext of jihad. Furthermore, he cautioned Muslims against financing terrorism and urged them to be careful about where their funds are going. These comments are significant because they go further than previous statements per refTel. The Grand Mufti statement follows media reports that the Ministry of Islamic Affairs launched an extensive media awareness campaign to protect youth against extremism. No official English translations has been published and the following quotes are Embassy translations. END SUMMARY.

12. (U) The Saudi Press Agency reported on October 2 that Sheikh Abdul Aziz Bin Muhammed al-Asheikh, Grand Mufti of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Chairman of the Board of Senior Ulema and Administration of Religious Research and Ifta issued a statement urging young Saudi men to refrain from running after the calls for jihad made by foreign groups. The Grand Mufti added that young Saudi men are often misled and exploited by "foreign suspicious organizations" under the banner of jihad to commit "heinous" acts for "destructive" purposes. He also believes these men feel strongly about their faith, but lack sufficient knowledge to distinguish right from wrong. He describes their lack of knowledge as the primary reason they are easily misled by some groups to bring about a hidden agenda and likely causes damage to the Islamic faith and its believers.

13. (U) The English language daily "Arab News" reported on October 3 that the mufti's statement follows media reports that a significant number of Saudis have been fighting alongside insurgents against US-led occupation forces in Iraq. Therefore, according to Sharq Al-Awsat, al-Asheikh was clear in his speech when he says, "our sons zeal and lack of religious learning has turned them into tools. They have been toyed with by foreign organizations and used to attain their inferior goals in dirty operations that are far removed from religion. Our youths have become a commodity that is bought and sold by Eastern and Western entities." He also added that he was compelled to make this statement after years of witnessing Saudis "sons" leaving for jihad. Although he believes the young men are passionate about their religion, he also reminded the youth that rejecting Islamic scholars and rulers is a major sin in Islam. Finally, he stated that in accordance with genuine Islamic teachings, it is the legitimate leader who calls and prepares for jihad - no one else.

14. (U) Subsequent reporting indicated that the Grand Mufti asked all Muslims to fear God and give some thought to the state of the Islamic nation and seek knowledge and guidance and avoid rash actions. He added, "I encourage possessors of

wealth to exercise caution in how they spend their wealth so that their money does not inflict damage upon Muslims." According to the press, this statement is important because it hit on a nerve in terrorist operations-- funding. By cautioning Muslims at this important time of giving Zakat (almsgiving during the month of Ramadan), al-Asheikh is likely cautioning against being deceived into financially backing "merchants of death and destruction."

15. (U) Al-Ashiekh's remarks follow media reports that the Ministry of Islamic Affairs announced on September 29, that it will launch an extensive media awareness campaign entitled "targeting youth to strengthen them against strange and extremist ideas, so they may develop a love of loyalty and belonging to their religion and leaders." The campaign will include announcements through Friday sermons, distribution of books and tapes, and articles on the Internet. Also according to Saudi Press reports, as part of its campaign to protect the youth against deviant thoughts and perverse faith, the ministry released a book on October 1 titled, "Guarding Against Terrorism." The book's preamble includes a quote from Salaman Bin Mohammed Al-Omari, Director General of the Ministry's Central Department of Public Relations, who said the core mandate of the ministry is to propagate the true Islamic faith and to fight "any devious and corrupt thoughts."

16. (U) COMMENT: The Grand Mufti is the most senior moral and religious authority in Saudi Arabia. He has no counterpart in the United States. His opinions are heard widely, are respected, and are an important part of shaping public opinion in the Kingdom. END COMMENT.

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